

THE BASTILE.

A DISILLUSIONING WORK.

THE BASTILE. By Captain THOMAS D. BINGHAM. In 16 vols. Illustrated. \$10. pp. xix, 470; v. 1, 510; v. 2, 500. etc. &c. &c.

The author of this work states in his preface that "the idea of tracing the history of the Bastile was suggested by the fact of the Republican Government having selected the anniversary of its fall as the great National holiday." If his object was to show that the French Government in making this choice of a National holiday had shown a singular ignorance of French history and had wholly misconceived the significance of the capture and destruction of the Bastile, it must be admitted that he has proved his case passing well. This is an era of disillusionment, and the indefatigable researchers of sceptical antiquarian and historical students have dissolved the fabric of so many venerable traditions and legends that perhaps the habit of doubt in regard to most past events ought to be established. But the din of rhetorical declamation, the perennial effervescence of revolutionary rant, concerning the Bastile, have done much to fire the general faith in the popular ideas of that fortress-prison; and consequently the revelations now made by Captain Bingham are apt to operate as surprises.

The accuracy of this story, however, does not appear to be open to impeachment. He had the inestimable advantage of the work done by the late M. Ravaisson, who devoted thirty years to arranging the state papers found in the Bastile when it was surrendered to the Paris mob. M. Ravaisson had finished sixteen volumes of these papers when he died. A great many Bastile documents had previously been collated and printed by de Remmire, Carnet, Tonnerer and Charpentier. A great many more remain undigitized. But it may be said that only quite recently has it been possible to obtain access to the whole of the surviving material, and that consequently Captain Bingham has succeeded in preparing the fullest and most correct history of the building that has been written. The Bastile has been for so long a time the synonym for despotic violence and iniquity that the necessity of revising that view radically is calculated to create a disagreeable impression. There is, however, clearly no help for it. Captain Bingham produces the soundest authority for each and all of his statements, and no matter how subservient of popular traditions they may be, they will have, sooner or later, to be accepted as the sober truth of history.

What he demonstrates may be summarized briefly. The Bastile never was the scene of special cruelties, tyrannies or wrongs. It was a prison in which persons charged with state offences were confined. Besides those noted criminals, people seeking sanctuary, young nobles who extorted or profited by causing their families to solicit their temporary confinement, were incarcerated there. The prison had narrow accommodations and at no time were more than one hundred persons confined there, while in general the number of prisoners was less than a fourth of that sum. When the Bastile was captured it had only seven prisoners, of whom four were awaiting trial on charges of forgery, and one of the others was an English officer who had lost his reason, and concerning whom nothing was known or has yet been discovered. Captain Bingham finds no support for the legend that it was customary to subject the Bastile prisoners to torture. On the contrary, the documentary evidence justifies the conclusion that even when the use of torture was general throughout Europe, and when no doubt it was sometimes employed in the Bastile as well as in all other prisons, it was not resorted to there far less frequently than elsewhere. At its capture search was made for instruments of torture, and the mob were puzzled at finding nothing of the kind. It is true that one man with a vivid imagination pointed out a small machine to the prison authorities for the torment of the poor prisoners but it was soon shown that the mysterious engine was simply a printing press which had been admitted for the convenience of literary prisoners.

As regards the general treatment of prisoners in the Bastile, Captain Bingham is able to prove that it was as a rule distinguished not only by humanity, but by liberality. There were three or four objectionable cells, into which people were thrust occasionally when the Government desired to emphasize its opinion of their demerits. Usually, however, these unwholesome and uncomfortable cells were reserved for precisely the same uses as the dark cells in modern prisons are applied to: that is, they were punishment cells for unruly and refractory prisoners. The prison diet appears to have been almost uniformly abundant and good. The best possible proof of this consists in the fact that at one time the prisoners complained of being too highly fed, and asked the Governor to lower their diet, and to divide the consequent saving with them in money. This was done, and apparently to the general satisfaction. There are, however, a number of instances cited, which go to show that the majority of the prisoners fared probably better than they would have done in any hotel of the period. Again and again prisoners speak of the capital meals they enjoyed in the old prison, and if a five-course dinner with wine and dessert be not a liberal menu for a jail, it certainly would be impossible to find a parallel to the Bastile dietary in any other prison records.

The absurdity of founding a National holiday upon the anniversary of the capture of this fortress is clearly exhibited in the course of Captain Bingham's history. The Bastile had really no bearing upon the revolution. It had long ceased to be a strategic point. It had never been used to restrain the populace or to incarcerate them. It was employed chiefly as a place of detention for those aristocrats who were regarded by its destroyers as their natural enemies. It was in fact as isolated from the issues of the time as is the Tower of London from any issues of to-day. Moreover, its capture can never reflect anything but discredit and shame upon those who were responsible for the deed. It was accompanied by treachery and massacre, the most execrable perfidy and the most horrible ferocity. The revolting details of the assassination of the governor, De Launay, would alone stamp eternal infamy on the event; and it was absolutely void of significance. No root of French liberty sprang there. No chartered abuse was overthrown with the historic walls. The whole action was illustrative of nothing but the devilish cruelty, bad faith, folly and propensity to clasp and rant of the Parisian mob, and the national judgment and taste which single out so discreditable and shameful a manifestation for perpetual glorification afford little room for the indulgence of any patriotic feeling having a sane foundation. In sober truth the capture of the Bastile is as unfit a subject for festive celebration as would be the destruction of the Hotel de Ville by the Communards in 1871, or the murder of the hostages by the same blood-thirsty scoundrels.

The whirligig of time, however, brought about its revenges during the Terror with bewildering rapidity, and many of the men who had proclaimed themselves patriots on the strength of having butchered some unarmed and surrendered guard of the Bastile, found their pretensions ignored and even scoffed at when the convenient word "suspect" took them before the fell revolutionary tribunal and thence, on the rattling tumbrils, to the guillotine. In that frantic time, when every one in France, like the "Chourouin" in Sue's tale, "saw red," no past services, real or imagined, protected the accused; and to be accused it was sometimes only necessary to be still alive. The capture of the Bastile signified the beginning of those awful massacres. Ever since its fall, as a French journal recently observed, "the blood of Frenchmen appears to have been inoculated with a revolutionary poison, which keeps the country in constant state of fever." Perhaps that is why the anniversary of the day is chosen as a National holiday; but if so, the fact cannot do much to strengthen the world's confidence in France. The best that can be hoped is that with Frenchmen as with most people the original significance of state festivals comes to be forgotten.

gotten or overlooked, the feast being thenceforward kept simply and solely as a day of rest and recreation.

The history of the Bastile cannot be written without at the same time sketching the history of France from the building of the prison, and this Captain Bingham has done with a great deal of care and research, and with considerable spirit. All line of notable passed through the gloomy old place, and their careers are in turn outlined with sufficient clearness. An interesting chapter on the Man in the Iron Mask was inevitable. It is not possible to discuss that subject without stimulating the curiosity of the reader. Captain Bingham conscientiously recapitulates all the guesses made, at the identity of the mysterious captive, and settles finally upon that of Colonel Jing, as being the most plausible, though of course only conjectural. The fact is that the archives thus far examined have thrown no light upon this historical secret, and even the latest speculation is not free from obvious objections. Colonel Jing thinks that the Man in the Iron Mask was a Lorraine named Marchiel, an adventurer, who plied with an Amsterdam banker named Groestz the assassination of Louis XIV. It is shown that knowledge of such a plot came to Leveque; that he arranged an ambush for the party of conspirators; that the chief was taken in the rest of the band escaping; and that the first appearance of the Man in the Iron Mask corresponds with the disappearance of this poisoner Marchiel. Moreover, Dr. Yance, one of the governors of the Bastile, under whose care the Man in the Mask finally died, called him de Marchiel in the register. This circumstance, however, is not corroborative evidence, because it was the custom to give state prisoners "in secret" fictitious names and to avoid mention of their real ones. Besides, what reason could there have been for taking so much pains to seclude a person of so little consequence in an age when the summary execution of such an offender would naturally have offered the surest method of silencing him? He was confined with the most jealous precaution for thirty years, and until his death. This seems to indicate that he was some one of consequence, and yet on the other hand it must be remembered that no man of importance known to have disappeared at the time when he was first heard of. There remains a faint hope that when the archives are more thoroughly examined some clue to this riddle may appear. Thus far, however, it continues as insoluble as ever, and the more it is considered the more do conflicting and irreconcilable facts appear to balance and neutralize one another.

Captain Bingham has brought together all the available information on this and every other point of interest connected with the Bastile. In the very nature of the subject it is impossible to write a continuous narrative, and this causes the present work to appear something like a mosaic. Nothing, however, is omitted which could contribute to the completeness of the record, and perhaps some readers may find the documentary evidence even unnecessarily full in places. But this is not a fault. Captain Bingham's work is exhaustive, and it will take rank as an indispensable and most valuable reference book. It is illustrated with a number of portraits of Bastile prisoners of celebrity in photogravure, and it is furnished with a sufficiently full index.

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A long line of notable passed through the gloomy old place, and their careers are in turn outlined with sufficient clearness. An interesting chapter on the Man in the Iron Mask was inevitable. It is not possible to discuss that subject without stimulating the curiosity of the reader. Captain Bingham conscientiously recapitulates all the guesses made, at the identity of the mysterious captive, and settles finally upon that of Colonel Jing, as being the most plausible, though of course only conjectural.

The fact is that the archives thus far examined have thrown no light upon this historical secret, and even the latest speculation is not free from obvious objections.

Colonel Jing thinks that the Man in the Iron Mask was a Lorraine named Marchiel, an adventurer, who plied with an Amsterdam banker named Groestz the assassination of Louis XIV.

It is shown that knowledge of such a plot came to Leveque; that he arranged an ambush for the party of conspirators; that the chief was taken in the rest of the band escaping; and that the first appearance of the Man in the Iron Mask corresponds with the disappearance of this poisoner Marchiel.

Moreover, Dr. Yance, one of the governors of the Bastile, under whose care the Man in the Mask finally died, called him de Marchiel in the register.

This circumstance, however, is not corroborative evidence, because it was the custom to give state prisoners "in secret" fictitious names and to avoid mention of their real ones.

Besides, what reason could there have been for taking so much pains to seclude a person of so little consequence in an age when the summary execution of such an offender would naturally have offered the surest method of silencing him?

He was confined with the most jealous precaution for thirty years, and until his death. This seems to indicate that he was some one of consequence, and yet on the other hand it must be remembered that no man of importance known to have disappeared at the time when he was first heard of.

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